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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3182
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SUBJECT: COOPERATION KEY TO SOUTH ASIAN WATER SECURITY

¶1. (U) Summary. The battle over water will drive geopolitical relations in South Asia in the 21st century as the flow of Himalayan rivers becomes increasingly unpredictable due to climate change, according to regional experts who attended a recent conference in Kathmandu. The only way to ensure that the nearly 40 percent of the world,s population that depends on these rivers has a secure supply of water is through meaningful scientific and governmental cooperation. End summary.

Battle over Water Resources Looming

¶2. (U) Water security will drive geopolitical relations in South Asia in the 21st century as nations in the region struggle to ensure an adequate supply, according to regional experts who attended a recent conference in Kathmandu on August 6 and 7. Ilmas Futehally of the Mumbai-based Strategic Foresight Group, which sponsored the event, said the clash to control oil that drove international geopolitical relations for much of the 20th century is being supplanted by the water security issues, especially in South Asia. Climate change is fueling the fight by making the flow of rivers in the Himalayan basin more unpredictable, according to World Bank economist Claudia Sadoff. She pointed out that nearly 40 percent of the world,s population depends on these rivers.

¶3. (U) The potentially explosive nature of water security issues was evident at the outset of the conference when an Indian participant complained about Chinese plans to build a large dam in the upper reaches of the Bramhaputra in Tibet, claiming it would adversely affect India,s intention to build a series of hydropower dams, with a total capacity of 50,000 megawatts, downstream. Zhang Shuang, director of the Nature Conservancy in China, cautioned that finger-pointing was counterproductive, and reminded participants that Tibet was a politically-sensitive issue for China.

Region,s Interconnectivity Underscored

¶4. (U) The presence of a large Chinese contingent among the 30 some participants highlighted the crucial role China will play in resolving water security issues. The headwaters of nearly all Himalayan rivers are in the vast Tibetan Plateau.

¶5. (U) Retired Major General A.N.M. Muniruzzman, president of the Bangladesh Institute for Peace and Security Studies, further underscored the region,s close interconnectivity on water resource issues. He pointed out that 52 rivers flow

into Bangladesh from India, a "regional hegemon" he berated for being uncooperative in addressing issues of mutual concern.

Climate Change Adversely Affecting Rivers

¶6. (U) Experts pointed out that climate change has, in recent years, resulted in lower than average levels of precipitation in the Himalayas, the "Water Tower of Asia," and, hence, lower flows in the rivers originating there. Equally worrying, they said, are the tremendous variations in where and when the precipitation falls.

Pollution Exacerbates Water Insecurity

¶7. (U) Noted Nepali water expert Ajaya Dixit pointed out that pollution is also affecting water security. "Why have we, the current generation, allowed our rivers to turn into open sewers... when our ancestors had conserved these rivers for thousands of years?" he asked. Not all the water pollution is man-made, however. Muniruzzman noted that about 80 percent of the groundwater in Bangladesh is contaminated by naturally-occurring arsenic.

Greater Understanding, Greater Cooperation Needed

¶8. (U) Participants decried the lack of detailed understanding of the Himalayan river systems in general and the impact of climate change on them. Closing this knowledge gap, they said, requires greater regional and international cooperation. Sadoff said the World Bank launched its South

Asia Water Initiative (SAWI), in part, to address this concern.

¶9. (U) As part of SAWI, the Bank is working with key technical agencies in India and Bangladesh to expand understanding of the Ganges Basin. A Bangladeshi participant pointed to his country,s agreement allowing India to construct the Farakka dam as an example of the dire consequence of ignorance. The dam reduced water flow in the Ganges, increasing salinity downstream, which, in turn, rendered barren large swaths of once-fertile land in Bangladesh.

¶10. (U) A senior Chinese participant said China looks forward to cooperating with other nations in the region to better manage water resources. Such cooperation, he said, must be based on the principle that all participants will be winners. He recommended that a regional institute be established to facilitate the exchange of information, which, in time, could be developed into a multi-lateral Himalayan Basin management commission.

Time for Action

¶11. (U) Several participants stressed the need to move beyond just talk, which they said, to date, has produced few concrete results. "Unless the required science and technological know-how are brought into the hands of local communities in the region so that they can understand and they adapt to climate change," said Dipak Gyawali, an internationally renowned water resource expert from Nepal, "we will only be blowing a lot of hot air."
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